

Positive Psychology

Brian Plummer and Sue Martinov have collaborated on a number of projects implementing practices consistent with the findings of Positive Psychology into schools and classrooms. This article is an edited extract from Jenny Fox Eades' Celebrating Strengths, published by the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology. It demonstrates how some of the research findings in this field can be implemented in classrooms. More examples will be explored in the presentation.

Playing games and focusing on positive learning and motivation can transform a classroom environment for the better. Consultant Jenny Fox Eades outlines the lessons that positive psychology can teach us.

Positive psychology brings scientific tools to the study of what makes people flourish, and the impact upon them of experiencing positive emotions. Good teachers have always known that cheerful children learn more effectively; now there are scientific studies that show this to be true.

So you can now legitimately spend the first five minutes of a lesson playing a game to put the children in a good mood, and then inform anyone who queries this that what you are doing is in accord with Barbara Fredrickson's **'broaden-and-build' theory** of positive emotions. It is, therefore, as educationally sound as it gets.

Changing habits

We get more of what we focus on. If we habitually focus on remedying weaknesses then we will struggle to help children to flourish. Conversely, if we focus on promoting positive habits of thought, speech and behaviour, we will help them to develop even further.

Positive psychology makes the basic point that removing weakness is not the same as building strengths. If you draw a line from -5 to +5 then much of education aims to move us from -5 to 0, where 0 represents OK or 'alright' or 'coping'. What it does not do is help us reach +5, the realm of flourishing.

A study into the poor achievement of children in inner cities in America found that this was caused by family breakdown, poverty, poor education, drug abuse – nothing surprising there. A rather different study asked not, why do so many children in inner cities fail, but why do some children from inner cities succeed? It looked at resilience and found that features such as social support, optimism, a sense of meaning, a focus on strengths and goal-setting helped children from difficult backgrounds to excel.

Positive psychology helps us form the habit of not how to fix a problem, but how to achieve more flourishing and excellence. How do I get more of that excellent lesson, that brilliant behaviour? What do I enjoy in my teaching and how do I expand my potential to experience it?

Maths and chocolate

Martin Seligman, the founder of positive psychology, quotes an experiment in which children were given a maths test. They were divided into three groups. One group took the test at once. Another was given an unexpected piece of chocolate and then took the test. A third group were asked to think of a time they were so happy they jumped up and down with joy and then they took the test. The second and third groups did better on the test.

Motivating learning

People used to think that fear was a good motivator for learning. Although that idea has lost favour, it has been replaced by a rather neutral approach: learning may be boring but it is good for you and so you have to do it. Now psychologists recognise that effective learning is linked to happiness and enjoyment.

Studies show that experiencing positive emotions gives us:

- a higher quality of attention
- a better working memory
- more verbal fluency
- an increased openness to information.

I strongly resist the idea that children need constant entertaining or ‘fun’ in a shallow sense. However, I am forced by the evidence to accept that humour, zest, enjoyment and what we might term ‘buzz’ facilitates learning.

The three areas that the American psychologist Martin Seligman highlights as being essential to happiness and wellbeing have to do with:

- happy memories
- flow
- hope and optimism.

We can use all three to improve learning in the classroom and our own enjoyment of teaching.

Happy memories

Our feelings about the past can dramatically affect how we feel and function in the present. Noticing only what we lack or have lacked, feeling resentment or sadness about missed opportunities, despair about past failures – all have very real effects in the here and now.

In the classroom, the child who remembers only what he or she got wrong yesterday, and who fails to pay equal or greater attention to what they got right, will be less resilient, and less persistent when struggling with the challenges of today.

Helping children to notice the positive aspects in each day, and to reframe ‘failure’ as a necessary and positive part of learning, is essential if children are to flourish and reach their potential. Fostering happy memories is a skill that we can build and use. One of the reasons I work to help schools create enjoyable festivals is because happy memories are part of what makes us resilient: they are like a store-house of hope to take us through the bad times.

Recalling a happy event, perhaps a time we could not stop laughing, suggests to our mind and body that we feel happy now. This produces chemical changes, a release of endorphins, in the present. Practising recall of happy memories teaches children that they are not helpless victims of their emotions: there are things they can do to improve their mood.

The stories we tell

What sort of stories do we tell ourselves when things go wrong? Psychologists call our mode of storytelling 'explanatory style'. Imagine I am running late for work because my car failed to start. My pessimistic thoughts start working overtime. 'I'm going to be late. This always happens. Now the client will think I am unreliable and cancel the training day. Word will get round, I may never work again, the children will starve, the house will fall down, we'll catch pneumonia and die!'

Thinking in this sort of way is fairly normal. What matters is whether we can shift our thinking to run more realistic lines, so that we say: 'I'm going to be late – that's not good. But I can ring ahead and warn them. I am usually very reliable. I have never been late before. This once I'll just have to apologise. We all have bad days, I'm human!'

The two stories leave us feeling very different. If we mostly tell ourselves negative stories and use more pessimistic explanations it will undermine our ability to keep going in the face of setback, to look forward optimistically. Left unchecked this can even lead to depression and unhappiness. Children mirror the explanatory style of the adults around them. If they hear adults saying, 'typical, this always happens to me, nothing ever works round here, nobody cares etc' then they will start to use these kind of 'stories' for themselves. Such stories undermine their ability to learn and to achieve their academic potential.

It is important that we practise telling ourselves positive stories and building positive habits of thought for ourselves, because positive habits are contagious and these are what we want to pass on to the children we work with.

Treasure chest

This is a box or an album of happy memories. Each person can have an individual treasure chest, or there can be one for the whole class. When you have a really good experience, you write about it, draw it, take a photo to remind you of it. You put the notes, or drawings, or photos into your treasure chest. When you are low, or wish to be inspired, you open it up and savour the good experiences all over again.

Prepare and repair

We need to think of ways to help children enter the sort of emotional state that enables them to learn. We may have prepared the room and our teaching materials. If, though, they (or we!) are cross, tired, hot or bothered, our teaching and their learning will be less effective.

To achieve this, you might tell a joke or show a brief funny video clip. Laughter really improves mood. Quieter souls among us need to work out different ways of boosting mood at the start of lesson. I use jokes and storytelling. I also use stillness and silence to create wonder, pleasure and relaxation – light a candle, darken the room. Occasional and unexpected pieces of chocolate also work wonders!

Introducing activities that children enjoy into the classroom is as essential a part of teaching as providing them with pencils and paper. Such activities can also be used to repair the atmosphere when things go wrong, when we lose our cool, blow our top or when it has been a bad-tempered, grumpy day all round.

Key lessons from positive psychology

- Help children to notice their positive experiences.
- Introduce activities that children enjoy into the classroom.
- Practise telling yourself positive stories.
- Use boosters to change the mood of your class.
- Foster 'flow'.
- When you get low, recall happy memories.
- Encourage children to go into their 'stretch' zone.
- Tell children to ask for help when they find themselves in the panic zone.
- Give children the courage to fail.

Flow

Preparing for learning in this way encourages what psychologists call 'flow'. Flow is defined as a sense of deep engagement in an activity, during which time passes quickly and the person is working at full capacity: nothing distracts us as we learn, grow and make progress towards our goal.

Flow has been written about by the wonderfully named psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihályi (pronounced Cheeks Sent Me High). He studied artists working at full capacity and noticed how oblivious they were to hunger or fatigue and how strongly self-motivated they were.

Flow is emotionally a rather neutral state, because the focus is so completely on the task at hand. However, the aftermath is invigorating; the person feels happy and relaxed with a sense of achievement.

Flow is more likely to happen when we are working at something we have chosen to do. University of Michigan psychologist Chris Peterson argues that flow is rarely experienced by pupils during any school activity, perhaps because most of their tasks lack that crucial aspect of choice.

In my experience children, especially younger children, do achieve flow in school but perhaps not as often as we might wish. Young children will play for hours, learning and growing, oblivious to what is happening around them. Translating that absorption into a more formal learning setting is a challenge.

Flow occurs not when we are masters of a subject but when there is a good balance between skill and challenge: too little challenge and we are bored, too much and we feel anxious or frustrated. Teachers who are skilled at judging that level for each child, and who can encourage them to follow their own interests in their work, will be those most able to help children function to their full capacity.

Meditating towards flow

Meditation is a highly focused kind of attention. I have developed a series of ‘meditative activities’ as a way of starting lessons which may encourage subsequent flow. These are calming, focusing exercises that can last as little as 30 seconds but allow children to gather themselves before the task at hand. Athletes accept and work on the importance of mental preparation before they compete so that they enter the ‘zone’ when they need to. Teachers and pupils will also benefit from mental preparation for the task of learning.

Stretch zones

We need to challenge students – hard work is challenging and you don’t achieve flow if you are bored – but we also need to make sure they are comfortable with making mistakes. We need to push them out of their comfort zones, because that is where flow, optimal functioning and most learning happens.

The psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar developed the concept of ‘stretch zones’ to describe those times when we move into learning spaces that involve tolerating a certain amount of fear and, consequently, the exercise of courage. We learn when we are challenged, not when we are totally comfortable; we develop when we master these challenges, not when we avoid them.

Outside our stretch zone, there is a panic zone. We don’t learn there although we might, with a lot of courage, survive there for a little while. I tell children that, if they find themselves in their panic zone, it is vital that they ask for help. It is the job of the adults around them to help them back into their stretch zones.

Exercising courage

We build self-esteem when we exercise courage, when we push ourselves outside our comfort zones and keep going until we do succeed.

Failure is an inevitable consequence to the exercise of courage. Failure is an indicator that we are working in our stretch zones. The problem is not failure, but the habit of giving up and retreating to our comfort zones. As Tal Ben-Shahar says frequently, ‘learn to fail or fail to learn’.

It is essential that we communicate to children that any failure on their part is normal, expected, and even welcome: it means that they are extending themselves. It is also crucial that they feel their failure is shared with us. If they fail, it is our problem, not their problem, and one we can solve together – children should not feel left alone with failure.

It is crucial to praise effort and perseverance and courage as much as, if not more than we praise actual results. Today I may get As but tomorrow, with the same effort, on a harder paper, I may get only Bs. If I think I have to get As to earn your good opinion, I may feel anxious and even give up. If I know I earn that good opinion by showing effort and courage, then I feel secure that I can do that just as well tomorrow.

That requires effort and courage and persistence – our role as teachers is to provide encouragement and recognition of those qualities when we see them. That recognition is actually much more valuable to pupils than stickers or rewards – they want our praise, our good opinion, a smile to let them know we care about them.

Encouragement, which is closely linked to courage, is key to the teaching role – acknowledging them, helping them to reflect on their own work and abilities, and recognising the effort they make, being appreciative of cooperative, helpful actions.

Dawning realisation

‘The most important development in the content of British schools so far this century has been the application of positive psychology. The last few years has seen the dawning realisation that it has a vital role to play in enhancing the lives of children and teachers.’

Anthony Seldon, master of Wellington College, in his preface to *Celebrating Strengths*.

Hope and optimism

Education is preparation for the future; time spent learning now in the belief that what is learned will help pupils to flourish in later life. Teachers need to be hopeful for their students if they are to have hope for themselves. Optimistic children show more persistence in tasks and achieve more academic success than children lacking in optimism. Building optimism is, therefore, a key aspect of education.

Optimism is part of what makes children and adults resilient. Resilient people bounce back from the setbacks of life. Resilient children experience deprivation or trauma in childhood but go on to be happy and successful adults. Other features of resilient people are:

- the ability to notice and control their own emotions
- a good sense of self-esteem
- a belief in their ability to make a difference to their lives and to achieve what they set out to achieve.

Resilient people can think clearly about their strengths and weaknesses, their successes and setbacks. They both feel a need for and are able to build good relationships with others. Another feature of resilient people is their ability to store happy memories against the hard times.

